

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 16, 2014

Time Needed on Agenda: 30 mins

Agenda Item: Quarantine Bison Disposition

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final (needs MEPA Decision Notice)

Background

FWP seeks to relocate 145 brucellosis-free bison to four locales that will help create or augment existing wild bison herds. The wild bison were part of the Bison Quarantine Feasibility Study, a research project that began in 2004 directed by FWP and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. The research was conducted at a facility near Corwin Springs north of Yellowstone National Park to determine if quarantine was a feasible method to repeatedly test and ultimately produce wild bison free of brucellosis, a disease that can cause some pregnant bison, elk and domestic cattle to abort their first calf. Results of the QFS were published recently in the *Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association*.

In March, state wildlife officials requested proposals from agencies or organizations capable of permanently caring for QFS bison for conservation purposes. The bison have been held at the Green Ranch, west of Bozeman, during their 5-year monitoring period. A group of state and federal scientists with technical expertise in bison health, genetics and management evaluated 10 proposals and determined five would fit the overarching goal of the bison study to use verified disease-free bison for conservation purposes. After further examination, FWP chose four proposals to undergo an environmental assessment. (<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/publicComments/2014/dispositionOfQfsBisonDraftEA.html>) .

Public Involvement Process & Results

The Quarantine Feasibility Study has gone through extensive public process, with an EA and 2005 decision notice that indicated resulting brucellosis-free bison would be available for conservation purposes. An EA analyzing four different proposals was issued on Oct. 1, and will be open for public comment for 30 days.

Alternatives and Analysis

In addition to the no action alternative, the Commission may choose to allow bison to be relocated to any or all of the following locations, up to the number requested, recognizing that 145 are available for relocation:

	<u>Requested</u>	<u>Recommended</u>
• Ft. Peck Tribes	All (145)	70
• Utah Div. of Wildlife	30	30
• Cherokee Nation of OK	50	35
• WCS/Bronx Zoo	30	10

While the fifth proposal, from the American Prairie Reserve, demonstrated strong qualifications for managing QFS bison for conservation purposes, the APR request wasn't included because a Statewide Bison Conservation Strategy Environmental Impact Statement for bison in Montana hasn't been completed. APR could, however, be considered for future bison relocations to its private lands south of Malta pending the results of a statewide bison EIS.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the Commission approve relocation of bison to any of the above entities, up to the number requested conditioned upon the successful completion of the EA and the outcome of no significant impact. In the event that the EA illustrates significant impacts that cannot be mitigated below the level of significant impacts, the Department will return to the Commission when the impacts are addressed.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve relocation of up to 145 bison to the four approved groups, up to the number requested, conditioned upon a finding of no significant impact in the environmental assessment and in concurrence with the final decision notice on the draft Environmental Assessment of Disposition of Quarantine Facility Study Bison.